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Customs border a backwards step

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Arlene Foster claimed on Tuesday that there is an alternative to the “backstop” in the Withdrawal Agreement that can offer a way-out of the Brexit bind for the border.

“We should be using technology”, she urged. “We should be using our intelligence. We should be using risk analysis.” And she is right. But that alone does not constitute a solution.

Around the world, there are seen to be four key ingredients for successful border management. The first is trust and cooperation between authorities and agencies on both sides. The second is the harmonization of approaches between these agencies. The third is the application of common standards to minimise the need for checks and controls in the first place. And the fourth is the use of technology to improve efficiency.

If you have the smartest technology in the world but no cooperation between border agencies and very different rules and standards on both sides, you have wasted your money. Technology may be the icing but it most certainly isn’t the cake.

What is more technology, intelligence and risk analysis depend on information. And information takes time to gather and to submit. Customs declarations are tricky things: commodity codes, value, weight, certifications if required, financial details, details on unloading, mode of transport etc. All goods being imported/exported across a customs border have to be declared, even if tariffs aren’t payable. There is as yet no adequate or suitable ‘Trusted Traders’ scheme functioning that would enable businesses to be permitted to move goods without making such declarations.

And once the border authorities receive this information, they need systems to process that data. The IT system for this on the UK side is currently in the process of an overhaul and the replacement is overdue, over budget and not designed to manage the fivefold increase in customs declarations that a UK/EU customs border would entail.

Then they need the means of checking that it is correct. And they need the wherewithal to follow on through if risk analysis indicates it to be false. This is where we get into the fact that enforcing a customs and regulatory border requires feet on the ground and inspections on premises if not at the border.

No matter which way you cut it, a customs and regulatory border is a backwards step that adds burden and cost to business that none wish to see and that few can afford.

The existence of the Protocol on Northern Ireland/Ireland in the Withdrawal Agreement means that such a step is avoidable, even through Brexit.

Katy Hayward